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## Salem looks to lure new business

Rural town lacks much commercial development

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Salem, Conn. — For seven years, Alex and Nick Alevras have been serving affordable Italian cuisine to a loyal customer base from their Hartford Road eatery.

Business was so steady at Two Brothers Pizza that the Alevrases decided in 2008 to double the dining room to 2,400 square feet.

As one of Salem's anchor businesses, town officials say Two Brothers Pizza is proof that a commercial sector can thrive in this small town between Colchester and Norwich.

"There's no question that if you provide a good product and do it consistently in Salem, there's a lot of people who will give you service," Economic Development Commission Chairman Frank Sroka said.

But for a town that didn't get its own ZIP code until the mid-1990s and whose post office still operates out of a general store, officials have been challenged to preserve Salem's rural character while expanding its tax base.

About 6 percent of Salem's property tax revenue comes from businesses — half the average of similar-size towns across the state, Sroka said.

That needs to change if Salem hopes to stay competitive and keep residents in town, First Selectman Kevin Lyden said.

Lyden, 52, was elected in November. He ran on a platform to spur economic growth and bring new businesses into town.

Last month, he hosted a small business seminar at Town Hall that provided marketing and branding advice to merchants, and about a dozen owners participated. He hopes to hold similar workshops quarterly.

"A lot of small businesses are up to their ears in doing their work, and need a little help to look into the future," Lyden said. "We want to be a business-friendly environment for our existing businesses and if we can attract new ones that fit our community character, that's what we want."

Lyden worked as a contractor for 26 years, and said he wants to use his business background to the town's advantage.

"I know the importance of marketing, training and business plans," he said. "A lot of small businesses really need help with that."

Sroka said the Economic Development Commission is in the beginning stages of setting up a business association, and town leaders want to launch a "buy local" campaign to encourage residents to keep their money in Salem.

### **Workshop planned**

Representatives from the Economic Development and Planning and Zoning commissions attend one another's meetings, and the two boards will hold a workshop to discuss fostering commercial growth in town.

Sroka said the boards plan to discuss a survey completed last month in which 400 residents commented on the future of the town.

"The end result is to create a vision and a plan that takes Salem to the next step in the process of where we want to be as a community going forward," Sroka said. "We want this to be an interactive process. Instead of confrontational, it's going to be try to be more collaborative."

Alex Alevras welcomed the efforts, saying the town needs more variety in its businesses, such as a small supermarket or a drug store.

"That's what this town needs to attract," Alevras, 35, said. "I think it's a good idea as long as they leave the politics out of it."